

# Sports' Day

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This is a work of fiction. Similarities to real people, places, or events are entirely coincidental.

SPORTS' DAY

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Written by Paula Puddephatt.





# Sports' Day

Of course, this was typical of our school. Event of the year, and what else could *that* be? Sports' Day.

I didn't even realise, back then, that I was dyspraxic. I mean, it was still the late 1980s. Dyslexia was recognised somewhat, but dyspraxia? Forget it. If you couldn't catch a ball, you were clumsy, end of. No one asked or cared why you were struggling. They were too busy laughing in your face, and calling you a "spastic", even though none of them understood the true meaning of that, much abused, term.

Anyway, whatever. Sports' Day shouldn't have affected me, as I was hardly likely to be participating. But every pupil at St. Andrew's Comp was obliged to join in "the fun", and to this end, we would have to carry our plastic chairs down the street and across the road, to the field by the running track. It belonged to the local sports' centre, I believe, but the school used it too, in addition to our regular playing field.

Daniel wasn't exactly into sports either, so he wouldn't be involved in any of the races - except to cheer on Isabella. But I was trying not to think too much about Daniel and Isabella. This day would be hard enough to get through, as it was.

"You *are* coming with us, Maud?" This from Jemma.

"Unless you're planning to hang around with Alison Brown and Louisa Clark, of course," added Charlene.

Yeah, because Jemma and Charlene had *always* been there for me, right? We, all three, knew that they were best friends with each other nowadays. I was the Third Wheel, and they only bothered with me when it suited them.

It was true enough that Alison and Louisa were trouble. But how many lunch breaks had I spent, waiting alone for the library to open, so that I could hide away in there? How many morning breaks had I spent walking in circles around the school, trying not to draw attention to my *on my own* status? Jem and Charlene hadn't cared then. They only wanted me now because they didn't want me going around with Allie and Lou - and that was more about *not* liking them than *liking* me.

I often wished I could tell them all where to go and how to get there: Alison and Louisa, *and* Jemma and Charlene. One day, maybe, I would. But this was school in the real world, and friends were essential, even if they weren't the genuine variety. They were the difference between standing around alone, and blending in somewhat. Were a necessary aspect of day to day survival.

More than anything, I didn't want Daniel and his friends to laugh at me. That would hurt too much, and possibly, send me over the edge.

I thought about Daniel, with his wavy, dark brown hair, and those striking blue eyes. With the sense of humour that warmed my heart - except on those occasions when it had been myself, at whom he and his mates had been laughing. But that had been mainly John and Gareth, hadn't it? Or so I told myself.

"I'm not meeting Alison and Louisa," I said. "Of course I'm coming with you guys."

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The first hour or so had been okay. At times, it had even been a laugh - like old times. Jemma, Charlene, and I had been real best friends for years, after all. We'd known each other since primary

school. Both of my friends were in races, which had meant time with each of them, without the other. Which made things better for me.

It couldn't last though, could it? It was as Charlene was re-joining us, after the one hundred metre race, in which she'd come a close second, that we were also joined by Isabella, Dawn, and Janis.

"I'm so glad we caught you guys!" Dawn's high-pitched voice was practically a scream, as per usual. "You *are* coming to Jan's party on Saturday, right? It's seriously going to be the best!"

"Dawn, keep your voice down," warned Janis. "It *is* still supposed to be somewhat exclusive, you know. We don't want *every-one* thinking they're invited." This with a definite, undeniable glare, in my direction.

"Of course it's going to be exclusive - only the best people. That goes without saying," said Dawn. "But Jem and Charlene *are* on the guest list, aren't they?"

"Naturally," said Janis. "Why wouldn't they be?"

"And yes, we're definitely coming," confirmed Jemma.

"We wouldn't miss it," added Charlene. "In fact, we were discussing outfits..."

I noticed that Isabella had apparently vanished.

Spun around to see the tall, slim, blonde, sitting with the guy I'd been in love with for over two years. They were all over each other - and that hurt more than any bitchy comment made by Bella's friends.

Daniel Harrison and Isabella Ross. The perfect couple. I honestly couldn't take much more.

I wandered off on my own, and that, predictably, was when Alison and Louisa appeared.

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"Hey, Maud - we were beginning to think you were avoiding us!" said Alison.

"Of course not. Why would I be avoiding you?"

"We thought you'd ditched us for Jemma Smith and Charlene Jackson again," said Louisa. "You were sitting with them, when we saw you."

"Yeah, well - never mind that," said Alison. "Wait until you see what we've got. You'll be happy enough to hang around with us then, believe me." She glanced around her. "Show her what's in your bag, Lou."

"What if someone sees?" whined Louisa.

"Not a teacher in sight," Alison assured her. "They're all too bothered about the poxy races."

Louisa duly opened her navy-blue schoolbag. Along with the usual exercise books, textbooks, and stationery were five cans of hairspray - and, since this was Allie and Lou, as opposed to Jemma and Charlene, or Bella and her clique - well, let's just say, valuable hairspray wasn't liable to be wasted, simply by being sprayed on to someone's hair. I noticed that Lou also had my personal favourite: a can of air freshener.

"But we can't - you know, here," I said. "They caught Christine and her gang smoking in the toilets, and they're watching everyone who goes anywhere near - monitoring how long they take."

"Yeah, well - sniffing in the toilets is kind of obvious, anyway," said Alison. "The best way is just to do it right here. As long as we're at the back, and we don't make it too obvious - honestly, everyone's watching the races, guys. They won't even notice."



"Won't even notice? What, if we start inhaling aerosol cans, right here, in front of everyone?" said Louisa. "You've lost it, Allic."

Louisa was right. There was no way we'd get away with that.

But then, I caught sight of Daniel and Bella, and I didn't even care any more. I grabbed the can of air freshener, along with a towel, which I'd also need.

My thoughts were racing. But, as the world dissolved into a too-familiar, hazy blur, none of it mattered any more. Nothing mattered. Nothing.

And there it was, in my mind - the idea that I might never stop. That I might keep going, and going, until...

Try - until the deputy head, Miss Rollins, caught me.

Even Alison and Louisa didn't seem to know what had hit them. How everything had escalated, at such a rapid pace.

I witnessed the various looks of contempt, disdain, horror, and pity on the faces of my classmates, as the teacher marched me back to school. Heard the distant buzz of their whispered conversations.

Straight to the headmaster's office. They were going to contact my parents, of course.

Daniel had looked at me as if I was something he wouldn't want to tread in. And his precious girlfriend had obviously been trying not to laugh. Dawn and Janis actually *had* giggled.

As had Jem and Charlene. Some "friends".

Sports' Day. Fun, right? Welcome to St. Andrew's Comprehensive.



# Second Chance

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## SECOND CHANCE

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Written by Paula Puddephatt.





## Second Chance

Emily Mason left the Arthur Hart Partnership offices at precisely 5.30pm. Took the lift to the ground floor of Summit House, the office building, in which the architects' office was located, and ultimately, emerged, via the revolving doors.

Five, painfully long, years of working as a secretary had come to an end. Emily waited for the feelings to wash over her. If not elation, at least relief. She no longer worked for the Arthur Hart Partnership. She was no longer a secretary.

It was Friday, and offices were emptying, all around her. The light rain seemed refreshing to Emily, although of course, umbrellas were already in evidence.

She thought of her best friend, Charlene Richards, and smiled. Charley would have been one of the first to open an umbrella, lest a drop of rain should threaten her glossy, raven-black hair. Emily would hazard a guess that her own auburn curls were as untidy as ever, but glamour never *had* been a priority, as far as she was concerned.

Charlene would be pleased for her, wouldn't she? Maybe that was whom she should phone. Or text, at least.

Because there had to be *someone* she felt like sharing this moment with. A moment she'd waited so long for, and worked so hard to achieve.

Of course, there were Mum and Katharine. But Emily knew she didn't want either of them to be the first person she spoke to. She needed someone to share her enthusiasm.

Because she *was* enthusiastic. Exhausted, perhaps - and, okay, maybe a little flat, in the moment. Which was precisely why she needed someone to help her feel more positive.

The obvious answer was Peter. He'd always been supportive of Emily's career. Well, he was an author himself, after all. He *got* it.

In fact, why hadn't Emily's first instinct been to contact Peter? She scrolled through the names in her phone, but didn't get as far as *Peter*.

*Marcus.*

Emily had no intention of calling Marcus. She ought to have deleted his number from her contacts.

She switched her phone off. Wasn't in the mood to communicate with anyone. Let's face it, she had no lack of people to tell - not really. She had her social media followers, and they were always supportive.

Emily tried to ignore the inner voice, taunting her. *They're supportive of Emmeline Parker, not you. Not Emily Mason. They don't even know Emily Mason.*

Which was ridiculous, of course. Emmeline Parker was Emily's pseudonym, that was all. They were still the same person. *Emily. Emmeline.* Either way, she was herself.

And her fans *did* appreciate her. They'd be super excited, that she'd finally reached the stage of being able to devote herself to her writing career, full-time.

Peter would be, too. She'd give him a ring later. And Charlene. Emily knew they'd both be thrilled for her.



"I still don't understand why you left that job. Surely it would have been more sensible to keep working?"

Emily took a deep breath, steadying her nerves. What had possessed her to phone Mum, anyway? And what did she actually expect? The woman was hitting every trigger, as per usual. *Writing is bloody work, Mum. Why are you so determined to invalidate my deepest passion?*

"It was the right decision for me. I never enjoyed secretarial work."

"Well, we all have to do things we don't want to in life, Emily." This, in her most magisterial tone. "Anyway, I shall have to speak to you later. Your sister's coming over, with the children. Perhaps you should consider finding another job. They were advertising for cashiers, at that new supermarket in town. It has to be better than nothing, doesn't it? 'Bye, then. *Do* stay in touch."

Yeah, because the incentive to do so was immense, after all.

She'd update Katharine via text. Just because this was a huge event, in her own life, it wasn't reasonable to expect her family to be excited, or to really get it.

Still, some degree of interest and support - was that too much to hope for?

But Emily didn't get the chance to compose that text, before her phone rang. *Charlene*.

"Hi, Charley. You don't know how great it is to hear from you, right now." She realised how low she sounded.

She wasn't actually *low* though, was she? Disappointed, perhaps - but definitely not low.

Whether she was or not, Charlene didn't notice. She started to talk, and of course, Emily might have known. *Rupert this. Ru-*

*pert that*. Charlene had recently got engaged, and since that day, hadn't talked about much else.

And, of course, Emily was pleased for her. She'd been pleased for her for three months now. Pleased for her at her over-the-top engagement party.

That was her life's role, after all - being happy for others. Happy for every new sofa her mum needlessly acquired, and every pregnancy her younger sister announced.

Emily made a couple of attempts to get a word in with Charlene, but her friend wasn't interested, and she no longer even cared that Charley didn't.

Emily was *past* caring.

She would focus upon *Dignity and Hope*: the forthcoming novel, in her Women's Fiction series. Or maybe work upon the outline for *Dark Angel*: Book Three in a Romance trilogy.

Ironical, that she wrote about relationships, romantic and otherwise, in her fiction. In real life, they weren't her strong suit.

When the intercom rang, Emily was tempted to ignore it.

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Peter Anderton was amazing. He had curly, dark brown hair, blue eyes, and was definitely attractive. But, more importantly, he was a decent bloke. The kind of guy who remembered, and celebrated, important milestones in his girlfriend's career.

The bouquet of sunflowers, and pink and yellow roses, almost brought tears to her eyes. *Shit, Em - don't start acting like one of the heroines in those Romance novels you churn out*. The thought came out of the blue, and shocked her.

Her heroines weren't that bad. And she did *not* "churn out" her novels. Did she?

Yeah, well - whatever. Emily's writing was a career. Sometimes, perhaps - yeah, she did churn out the words. She did find herself recycling plots, reusing the same few tropes. But still, her work did come from the heart. It *did*. Mostly, anyway.

She found a vase for the flowers. Flicked the switch on the kettle.

"Emily, are you okay?" asked Peter, when she'd finally sat down next to him, on the sofa.

"Of course I am. I finally managed to quit my job. It's what I've been wanting for so long."

"I know." He put his arm around her. "So, why are you so unhappy, babe? You're not regretting your decision?"

The tears started then. Tears of gratitude - because Peter knew. He actually cared, and he actually knew. She wasn't happy. And, no matter how much Emily tried to deny the fact, she couldn't - not any more. She had what she thought she'd always wanted, and she still wasn't happy. Not even close.

She wasn't regretting her decision to leave the Arthur Hart Partnership, no - much as that might disappoint her mother, who wished nothing better for her than a life of tedious, soul-destroying admin work.

As long as Mum could give an appropriate response to her own mother, Emily's aunts and uncles, the neighbours - whomever it might concern.

When asked what her daughters were doing, she could confirm that Eldest Daughter was towing the line, and then discuss her favourite subject: her younger daughter and son-in-law, and their four *oh-so-perfect* children.

"I don't regret my decision," Emily told him, at length - making the effort to maintain eye contact. "It *is* what I want. But I'm still not happy. It doesn't make sense, but that's the truth."

"Maybe it's time to let yourself have your own HEA, Em. For so long, your energy has been devoted to creating happy endings for your characters."

She smiled, finally - genuinely. And Emily loved that Peter knew the term "HEA": *Happily ever after*. He was an author too, but definitely not Romance. He wrote primarily Horror, and occasional dark Thrillers. But he read every novel, novella, and short story of hers, and had always been supportive. She actually felt bad that she'd read relatively few of Peter's books. She needed to rectify that, and soon.

He was right. Emily was so ready for her own HEA. And she wanted it to be with him. She really did.

She was going to let it happen. Be happy, with the man of her dreams. And stop thinking about the guy who had broken her heart, over a decade ago. Marcus Ford was her past.

Emily was thirty-three years old now, and so ready. She wanted marriage and kids, like Katharine and Charlene, and just about everyone else. And yes, she'd assumed she would marry her childhood sweetheart, but it hadn't happened, and it was seriously time to move on.

She couldn't think of anyone she'd rather move on *with* than Peter Anderton. As Emily returned his passionate kiss, she knew that. She was more than ready for love.

Although the Royal Oak was a comparatively quiet pub, this was Saturday night - meaning that the place had become increasingly busy, as the evening progressed.

"You okay, Em?" Peter was genuinely concerned.

Emily lightly touched his arm. "I'm fine," she assured him, aware that she should be more than "fine". Like, *happy*, perhaps?

She took a decisive swig of Budweiser, which appeared to help, somewhat. Short-term, at least.

"I could still text Charlene or Rupert, you know. And maybe your sister. It seems a pity none of them are here, helping you celebrate. I can't help thinking that's why..."

Why what? Why she was miserable?

"I know you're trying to help, Peter, but leave it, okay?" Emily knew the frustration was starting to come through, in her tone. "Charlene and Rupert are bound to be busy, and Katharine has four kids. She can't just drop everything for me." Can't or won't - either way, she wouldn't be coming, and Emily didn't especially want her to.

The sad fact was that she and her sister had almost nothing in common nowadays.

"By the way, I've made a decision," she told him. "I don't need the income from a full-time job now, but I'm going to start teaching at the college again. It would supplement my writing income, and it's also not the same as the secretarial work, because I do actually enjoy it."

"Sounds good," said Peter. "Can I get you another drink?"

"It's okay. I'll get the next round."

That said, Emily headed for the bar. Where she saw him, after all this time.

Marcus Ford was as gorgeous as ever, with his wavy, blonde hair, and large, almond eyes. For one surreal moment, the surrounding world faded into monochrome, and all she could feel was his nearness.

“Emily - hi.”

“Hello, Marcus.”

Then, she realised, and the spell was broken. “I’m sorry. I don’t think we’ve met,” said the blonde girl. The ridiculously beautiful blonde girl - aged about twenty-two, tops.

“Sophia, this is Emily, an old school friend. Emily, I’d like you to meet my fiancée, Sophia.” Fiancée? No *way*. And Emily was “an old school friend”? That was all their relationship amounted to, in his mind.

She just about remembered Peter’s existence - and was relieved to be able to introduce Marcus and Sophia to at least her *boyfriend*. Still couldn’t compete with “fiancée”, though. And she couldn’t deny the truth either, however much she wanted to.

The relationship between herself and Peter would never work. She was still in love with Marcus Ford. Always had been - always would be.

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Two months later, and Emily was no longer seeing Peter, or anyone else. Not because of Marcus, in particular. She simply wanted to focus upon her career. Between writing and marketing, both of which she had thrown herself into with a vengeance, Emily didn’t have time for much else.

Best way, as she didn't get the chance to overthink her situation. And she didn't get much opportunity for indulging in pointless fantasies about Marcus.

Marcus Ford was her past. As was Peter Anderton. Emily didn't need a bloke in her life, when her career was going better than ever.

It wasn't as if Emily's mother needed to be unduly concerned about a lack of grandchildren. She had Katharine for that. Who - surprise, surprise - was pregnant *again*. So, Ava, aged eleven, five-year-old Thomas, and three-year-old twins, Edwin and Olivia, would soon have a baby brother or sister. Whilst Emily utilised rapid release for her books, her sister was the prolific one, in terms of procreation.

That evening, Emily was back at the local college, ready to teach Creative Writing: her second week back. And she was enjoying a relaxing coffee, in the canteen, before taking her class - leisurely browsing through her various notes, for the term's planned lessons.

And that was when she spotted Marcus, heading in her direction. Her heart hammered. He was, at least, on his own, this time.

"Hi, Emily. I didn't know you came here. Can I join you?" Not entirely a question, as he'd already placed his coffee down, and started to remove his jacket.

"Yes - yes, of course." His tone had been *way* more casual than hers, hadn't it? Not good. *Keep it together, Em.*

"I'm redoing my English GCSE," he told her. "Of course, English GCSEs were never a problem for you."

She managed a faint smile. "The one subject I've never struggled with, pretty much. I actually teach Creative Writing here now."

"Awesome." He hesitated. "To be honest, though - I'm a little surprised that you never made a career as a writer yourself."

Emily was stunned. But, of course, she'd used a pen name. And it had been a long time.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean..." His voice trailed off.

"It's okay," she said. "I guess we've been out of touch for a long time, that's all." She took a deep breath. "Sophia's stunning, by the way. When are you getting married?"

His expression seemed to darken.

Or her imagination. Wishful thinking?

Apparently it *was*, because the next moment, he answered a call: "Sophia, I told you I'd call you back later. I'm at the college...No, darling...Yes, darling, of course...I've got to go, Soph. We'll speak some more later, okay?"

The "darlings" hurt - and the affectionate "Soph". Yet, he seemed agitated, in a stressed out way - not a good way.

Why was she doing this - driving herself crazy over this guy? Again? Marcus Ford had refused to commit to their relationship, and had now got engaged to another woman. And maybe he still had some commitment issues, which would ultimately threaten *that* relationship too, but how did it affect Emily, either way?

"We're not," said Marcus, looking Emily straight in the eye.

"Not what?"

"Not getting married. Sophia thinks we are, but it isn't happening. Emily, can we go for a drink later? I think we need to talk."



Emily hesitated. Hadn't Marcus referred to her as "an old school friend"?

But the look in those almond eyes told a different story - as did what he'd just said about his relationship with Sophia.

And Emily's own feelings were definitely more intense than those associated with friendship.

"Unless - I mean, your boyfriend..."

"I broke up with Peter. It wasn't working."

Marcus touched her arm, lightly. "Sorry to hear that," he said, even though they both knew *that* was a lie.

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The Red Lion was comparatively quiet, for a Friday night. Marcus took a decisive swig of his pint of Heineken, the first real indication that he might not be feeling as entirely unfazed as he appeared.

Emily sipped her red wine. Since when did she drink wine, red or otherwise? But she hadn't wanted to go along with having her "usual": translation, bottle of Budweiser. For some reason, she hadn't wanted Marcus to assume that her "usual" would be exactly the same as it had been, years ago. Even though it *was*.

*Get a grip, Emily. Stop analysing everything, and behaving like a lovesick teenager. You're thirty-three. And you're not lovesick, either.*

Yeah, right.

"I actually did pursue my writing," she told him. "I write under a pen name - Emmeline Parker."

"Really? That's awesome, Em!" Marcus looked momentarily reflective. "Emmeline Parker? That name rings a bell. You know,

I'm sure Jessica and Bryony both love your books." Jessica and Bryony being his two younger sisters. "They're Chick Lit, right?"

"Well, that's not so much the current term," said Emily, "but kind of. Some come under Romance, and others, Women's Fiction. And it's great to hear that your sisters like my stories. How *are* Jess and Bry?"

It was incredible how natural it felt, being with Marcus. There was so much to catch up on, about the changes in their respective circumstances. And yet, in many respects, it felt as if no true distance had ever existed between them. Nothing significant had changed.

Emily was as much in love with Marcus as ever, and she hardly dared to hope...

But, of course, she *was* hoping. She hoped, with all her heart, that Marcus felt the same way about her.

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It wasn't until the following morning, that Emily checked her Facebook messages - having long since opted not to receive social media notifications via her phone.

And there it was, glaring at her: a message from Sophia Jackson. Profile pic: clearly the same elegant, glamorous Sophia, whom Emily had met with Marcus.

Emily read the message through twice, before switching off her phone altogether.

Finally allowed the tears to flow. Once they'd begun, Emily couldn't hold back. Released years of pent up heartache, via sobs that, at times, almost choked her.

When she finally stopped crying, Emily experienced a sense of clarity. She was going to be okay. Would focus upon her career, of course. That always *had* been her strongest area.

She could survive without Marcus. She'd done fine on her own for years, after all.

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Emily was making significant progress on *Dignity and Hope*, in addition to doubling down on her social media marketing efforts, with particular emphasis upon the *Obsession's Dance* series. Given that *Dignity and Hope* would be the next release in that series, it made sense to focus her attentions there.

She attempted to ignore the intercom. But whomever it was wouldn't leave her in peace.

She checked the video. Bloody marvellous. Katharine and Charlene. And, given that this was a collaborative effort, Emily knew both her sister and best friend well enough to realise that the two of them meant business.

Might as well let them in, and get this over with. The sooner she did so, the sooner Emily could, with any luck, get back to work.

Katharine - tall and blonde, and so much like their mother - came straight to the point: "So, are you going to tell us what's going on, Emily?"

"We were concerned," added Charlene. "Your mum said you'd given up the job at the college now, as well as your full-time job. And you haven't been answering the phone."

"I've been busy. And the writing *is* my full-time career now. I don't question why *you* spend your life churning out babies,

Katharine - or cross-examine *you* about why you choose to spend your days working in some bank, Charlene. If neither of you opt to support what I'm doing - and same goes for Mum - then that's up to you. But, if you can't be supportive, at least try to respect my life choices. It's true that I haven't been returning your various phone calls, texts, and emails. Maybe you need to ask yourself why that might be, and give me some space. I'm fine, and your concern is noted and appreciated, but really not needed."

"Your behaviour is *not* normal. You must be able to see that," said Katharine. "Mum will probably be in touch, at some point."

Like, Emily *couldn't wait*.

But she resisted the urge to comment, and merely showed them both out.

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Precisely one week had elapsed since Katharine and Charlene's visit. Apart from a couple of uncomfortable phone conversations with her mother, Emily hadn't encountered many other distractions. The writing was going well, as was the marketing.

Emily took an appreciative sip of her cappuccino. Her favourite coffee shop, Annabella's, definitely helped, in terms of Emily's productivity. She felt herself relax into the familiar hum of surrounding conversations, and soothing instrumental music - primarily piano and harp - which played constantly, at a low volume.

"Emily?" A familiar masculine voice.

"What are you doing here, Marcus?"

"I remembered you telling me this was where you often came to write. Please, Em - just hear me out, okay?"

He was sitting down already, and the waitress came to take his order - so Emily simply nodded. But she could seriously have done without this.

"I thought your fiancée said everything already - in the Facebook message she sent me," Emily told him, at length. "I take it you know about that?"

"Yes. Sophia and I had a major row, and she admitted she'd done that. And I told you before that she isn't my fiancée any more. It hurts that you chose to believe what she told you, without even asking me about any of it." He hesitated. "Emily, Sophia has serious mental health issues, and she *will* be getting help for her problems."

Their eyes connected.

By the time Emily left the cafe with Marcus, she had already accepted it.

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"I can't fight this any more," she admitted.

They were seated on a bench, around the corner from Emily's flat, opposite the chip shop, newsagent's, and chemist. Turned out that these shops were directly opposite to the flat Marcus had recently moved into. On his own, apparently.

"So stop fighting it," said Marcus, before they, inevitably, kissed.

"You never respected my career as a writer," said Emily.

"I know. But that was a long time ago. I love and respect every part of the woman you've become, Emily Mason - or Emeline Parker, if you prefer."

Emily giggled. "No, Emily will do. But thank you. It means a lot. And you and Sophia - that really is over?"

"Yes, it is. You and Peter?"

"Over, too. He never stood a chance, when I was still in love with my childhood sweetheart. I do love you, Marcus. But, listen, let's take it slowly this time. It's not as if either of us are going anywhere, after all."

The change was instant. Marcus became visibly uncomfortable. Emily's heart pounded, and she felt momentarily light-headed. "Marcus, what is it? Something's wrong, isn't it?"

"I've been offered a promotion. It's the opportunity I've been hoping for, Emily - all these years. But it means moving, and I really want you to come with me. The position I've been offered is up north, in Newcastle."

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After breaking up with Marcus, Emily tried everything.

Working a lot, of course. Which was effective - to a point.

Going out and getting drunk with some of the crowd she used to work with at the Arthur Hart Partnership. That achieved nothing, apart from creating the hangover from hell. Emily definitely felt the difference between her eighteen-year-old self, and the thirty-three-year-old version.

And then, she tried contacting Peter again. Because, let's face it - Peter *got it*, about the writing.

Marcus never had or would. He could say he did, but had ultimately proven that his own career would always be his priority. And he expected it to be hers, as well.

Yeah, well - Peter had, apparently, moved on already. With Helena Clark, of all people. Helena had been in Katharine's school year and, let's just *say*...

Anyway, not important. Peter had found someone else, and why shouldn't he? Emily was, at best, vaguely disappointed, but definitely not heartbroken.

At least, not over Peter.

She would focus upon becoming happily single. That honestly did seem to be her best option.

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Evening out with Charlene. Now, that *had* to help, surely?

Except, of course, that it hadn't. The flirting hadn't really been fun. The alcohol hadn't been, either. Had Emily learnt nothing from her previous attempt at a night out?

"You okay now?"

She nodded. Caught a glimpse of her reflection in the mirror, and it wasn't pretty: eyes red raw, and mascara all over the place. Hair in a total mess. "Yeah, I'll be okay. Sorry, Charley."

"Don't be. But, Emily - you need to talk to him. To Marcus. You know that, don't you?"

"Yes, I know." Out came the hairbrush and make-up bag. Emily would definitely need to freshen up, before she and Charlene could go back out there.

Nothing about her writing career was restricted by location and, if Marcus wanted her to go with him to Newcastle, she would. Because a lifetime of feeling miserable, and getting drunk at clubs, where she was old enough to be mother to most of the guys on offer...

Tomorrow was Saturday. She'd go over to his place, in either the morning, or as near as she could manage, after another night of heavy alcoholic consumption. She was *seriously* over the whole clubbing thing.

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Emily felt surprisingly refreshed, and not significantly hungover. And she'd never been more determined - more certain. The morning seemed filled with birdsong, and the aroma of cherry blossom.

Even when she first saw them together. Same bench, on which she and Marcus had kissed...

He and Sophia were talking, that was all. Emily was *not* going to jump to conclusions this time.

Okay, yes - they *did* look intimate.

But then, they kissed, and any trace of doubt was removed.

They hadn't spotted her, and she was grateful for that much. Marcus would never know that he had broken her heart, all over again.

She had wanted to believe in second chances, but no way. Emily had been deluding herself, pretending to be one of the heroines in her own fiction.

Yes, well - fiction was exactly that. Not everyone, in real life, was meant to have their happy endings. And Emily was one of the many who never would.

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"Emily, you have a visitor," said her aunt.



Emily frowned. Here? So few people knew where she'd been staying, for the past month. Charlene? Emily did say she could visit, at some point - but they'd been discussing maybe next weekend. Nothing concrete.

"Is it Charlene?"

"No, not Charlene, love," said her Mum's younger sister, Julia. And it was there, in the slender, blonde woman's expression.

Emily was going to kill whichever one of them had given away her location. The only people who knew were Mum, Katharine and her husband, and Charlene. They'd had no right to let Marcus have this address.

But, as she saw him appear, beside Julia, Emily's heart skipped a beat. She still loved him. What was even wrong with her?

She could never take him back now. And yet, how could she turn him away? Did she have it *in* her?

"I'll leave the two of you to talk," said Julia.

"Thank you, Julia," said Marcus.

*Yeah, thanks a lot, Julia. This is all I need.*

"Which one told you where I'd be? Katharine? Charley?"

Emily remembered something, at that point. She and Marcus had stayed at this house together once - for a couple of nights.

"Neither. I wracked my brain, trying to think of where you might have gone," he said. "I remembered coming here with you, and managed to find the address, in an old address book."

"Seems like a lot of trouble to go to. But, Marcus, I came to see you, the weekend after...You were with Sophia, kissing. Same bench where you kissed me."

"And you didn't think to ask me about it? Just jumped to your own conclusions?"

"You were all over the girl," she said. "Actions speak louder than words."

"*She* kissed *me*. Yes, I'd been trying to help her." He made his way to where she sat, on the bed in the spare room. Sat down next to her, and Emily could feel the warmth of his body - luxuriated in the man's nearness. "But I realised I couldn't. That was the last time I saw her. You'll believe what you want to, Em, but that's the simple truth. I don't love Sophia. I love *you*. I always have, and I always will."

"Shouldn't you be in Newcastle? The job?"

"I should have started last week, but I convinced my boss I needed more time. Said I had some personal issues to resolve."

"And these 'personal issues' - do they include me?"

"They *are* you. I've decided I want to be with you, either at home or in Newcastle. I'd prefer the latter but, if it comes to a choice between the promotion and you, I choose you - the beautiful, successful author, who I love and eventually, want to marry."

She was stunned. "Marry". The single word echoed in Emily's mind. The rest of what Marcus had said had been amazing. But that one word - *wow*.

"I can be a beautiful, successful author anywhere - at home, here in Bournemouth, or up in Newcastle. Of course we can move to Newcastle. One question, though."

"About Sophia?"

"No, not about Sophia. About the 'eventually' thing - in connection with the marriage part - how 'eventually' are we talking?"

Marcus kissed Emily, so passionately that she could no longer be in any doubt about him and Sophia, herself and Peter, or any other irrelevant diversions. And she, of course, returned his kiss, just as passionately.

“Will you marry me, Emily Mason?” he asked. “And, as far as I’m concerned - that means, the sooner, the better. We’ve waited long enough, don’t you think? Not everyone gets a second chance, and I think we ought to take ours.”

Emily couldn’t have agreed more. So, turned out the HEA thing was real, after all.

